Rev. Dr. Carlan Helgeson

June 9, 2019

**“COME, HOLY SPIRIT!”**

John 14: 8-17

I’m so glad that Pastor Giuseppe doesn’t advertise when I am preaching! That way at least a few of you show up!

Have you heard that saying, “You get what you pay for?” Well, I preach for nothing!...just letting you know!

[Originally, I was going to talk about the people in my last congregation, but a few of them said they were going to show up today so that put the kibosh on that idea! Now I don’t know what I’m going to say!]

Today is Pentecost, a day originally celebrated by the Jews in Jesus’ day as a time to remember the giving of the law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. But when the disciples gathered in Jerusalem two thousand years ago just days after Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension, they were waiting for something else, or rather *someone* else—someone that Jesus had promised would come. That Someone was the Holy Spirit.

Who is the Holy Spirit anyway?

A new priest was so nervous that he could hardly say his first mass. After mass, he asked the monsignor how he had done. The monsignor replied, “Well, when I am worried about getting nervous in the pulpit, I put a glass of vodka next to the water glass. If I start to get nervous, I take a sip.”

The next Sunday the priest took the monsignor’s advice. At the beginning of the sermon, he got nervous and took a drink. As he went along, he continued to calm his nerves by imbibing, and he preached up quite a storm. Upon returning to the vestry, the new priest found the following note: “Sip the vodka; don’t gulp! There are 10 commandments, not 12, and there are 12 disciples, not 10. We do not refer to Jesus Christ as ‘the late JC.’ Lastly, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not referred to as Daddy, Junior, and Spook!” …(I guess that’s why the Altar Guild didn’t give me my Grey Goose today!)

Most of us have been hearing about the Holy Spirit, or Holy Ghost as he used to be called, since our childhood. The designation sounds kind of like a spook—a spirit, a ghost. We have this idea that the Spirit sneaks up on us like a mist or a fog and makes us do certain things we don’t like. That certainly was not the experience of the faithful disciples praying together as reported in our reading from Acts today. God *ripped* open the skies and sent the Spirit *flaming down* from heaven with a tornado-like wind and *torched* the heads of the gathered, loosing their tongues in a cacophony of foreign languages (something that has always made me jealous since I have spent years of my life trying to master other languages!)

Yes, this was no quiet event! The place shook with heaven-sent energy. (Why, it’s downright dangerous for us to be here today, praying for a reprise of that Pentecost Day!) The Christian Church was born that day, and everything was changed. It was a day when all were made one—young and old, male and female, fishermen and tax collectors. No one was better than the other. Most importantly, the Spirit was no longer “out there somewhere.” After Pentecost, the Spirit was *inside* of the believers. As Jesus said in our Gospel lesson for today, **“**[The Spirit] **abides with you, and he will be in you.”** Isn’t that an awesome thought—that God would fill us with God!?

Two Irishmen, Patrick Murphy and Sean O’Brian, grew up together and were lifelong friends. But alas, Patrick developed cancer and was dying. While on his deathbed, Patrick called to his buddy, “O’Brian, come ‘ere. I ‘ave a request fir ye.”

Sean walked over to his friend’s bedside and knelt down. ‘Seany, ole boy, we’ve been friends all our lives, and now I’m leaving ‘ere. I ‘ave just one last request fir ye to do.”

Sean burst into tears and says, “Anything, Patrick, anything ye wish. It’s done.”

“Well,” continues Patrick, “under me bed is a box containing a bottle of the finest whiskey in all of Ireland—bottled the year I was born, it was. After I die and they plant me in the ground, I want ye to pour that fine whiskey over me grave so it might soak into me bones and help me enjoy it for all eternity.”

Sean, overcome by the beauty in the true Irish spirit of his friend’s request, asks, “Aye, tis a fine thing ye ask of me, and I will put the whiskey on yer grave. But, Patty,… might I be allowed to run it through me kidneys first?”

God wanted to pour out the Holy Spirit into the world, to bring life to the dead bones of this world, and God chose to do that by running the Spirit through *us* on his way to bless the world! We have the Holy Spirit of God in us! Do we even know what we have?

A collector of rare books ran into an acquaintance who told him that he had just thrown out an old Bible that he found in a dusty, dilapidated box. He said that Guten-somebody-or-other had printed it.

“Not Gutenberg!” gasped the collector.

“Yeah, that was it!” said the friend.

“You idiot!” replied the collector. “You’ve thrown away one of the first books ever printed. It was worth half a million dollars!”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” said the friend. “It had a lot of scribbling all over the margins by some guy named Luther.”

We have the Holy Spirit in us. Do we know what we have?

In my ministry I’ve encountered sincere, searching people who were always looking for God and God’s gifts to come crashing down from heaven like that first Pentecost. But that doesn’t happen like that much any more. You see, the Holy Spirit didn’t retreat back into heaven to hide out until we beg for another spiritual flood from heaven; the Spirit stayed right with us. Jesus said that God would give us **an Advocate to be with [us] forever**. We’re not supposed to look *around* us for God’s Presence; rather we’re to look *inside* of us. It’s just like healing power. Any honest doctor will tell you that all surgeries and medicines do is enhance the healing power already resident within our bodies. We are healed from the inside out, not the other way around. Every wound that closes and disappears teaches us that! That’s the way it is with all God’s graces; they come from the Spirit within. Ever since that first Pentecost, it’s been an *inside job*!

Jesus told Philip, **“You know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you.”** The Holy Spirit lives in you. If ever there was a need for the Holy Spirit in this world, now is that time. We are Spirit-bearers to a broken world. Do you know the Spirit in you?

The Spirit in you brings power.

A few years ago a West Hernando Middle School student, Miguel Rodriquez age 12, took his life by hanging himself. What could cause such a young boy to turn to death as an escape? Bullying! Miguel’s mother cited a multitude of instances which her son reported to her about the treatment he received from bullies in his class before he ended his short life.

I myself was sitting in a barbershop one day when I heard a Middle School boy talk about the bullying that goes on in his school. His mother got a call from the principal informing her that her son’s name was on a “kill list” that another student had drawn up and posted on social media.

The first and most important prerequisite for learning in a school is a sense of safety. Sadly, this is lacking in a lot of classrooms even in our own Hernando County. Don’t you think it’s time for Spirit power?

One of my former parishioners forwarded an outrageous article to me via email. The article told about a Texas cheerleader who was raped by a star basketball player. While the investigation was underway, the boy was allowed to continue to play ball; but when the girl refused to cheer for him by name at a game, she was kicked off the squad! She was upbraided and forced to quit for refusing to cheer for her rapist! Isn’t it time for Spirit power?

A three-year-old boy washes up on a Turkish beach, one of 12 who drowned trying to reach Greece for a better life. His family was fleeing unspeakable violence and war in Syria. Families and children are clamoring at our southern border, most not sneaking across illegally, but presenting themselves for asylum in our country as they flee the violence and drugs, poverty and famine of Central America, especially Guatemala. Ironically, the same people who flee for their lives sometimes die before they taste the freedom they seek. They weren’t as fortunate as my ancestors and yours who came to this land generations ago. What should we do? Isn’t it time for Spirit power?

We live in such a screwed up world—a world where children have to be afraid to go to school and cheerleaders have to be afraid of sexual assault and immigrant families have to fear for their lives. Where is this Spirit power anyway?

An Ottawa, Kansas, mother accidentally backed over her six-year-old daughter in the driveway, pinning her under the vehicle. Neighbor Nick Harris saw Ashlyn Hough under the car and ran over to help. The 5’7” 185-lb. lifted the Mercury sedan off of the girl and pushed her out from under the tires. The police can’t explain it; neither can Harris himself. The Spirit came in power to save.

A few weeks ago eight-year-old Salem Sabatka was walking with her mother in Fort Worth, Texas, when a car pulled up and a man inside the car pulled the girl into it and sped off, kidnapping the helpless child. The crying mother screamed for help. Several law enforcement agencies, including Homeland Security, spent the night searching for the girl; but it was two members of a local church who led the police to the suspect’s car in a hotel parking lot. They had seen the posts of Salem’s photo and the vehicle driven by the kidnapper and they made it their mission to locate the culprit, who was then arrested and jailed. The Spirit came in power to save.

Superhuman strength, unbelievable odds—who can explain it? Jesus told the disciples in the Upper Room, **“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in the Father, and you in me, and I in you.”** The Spirit comes in power! Do you know that power?

The Spirit in you also brings truth.

I am completely astounded at politics in our country these days. Anybody else feel that way? I mean, politics has always been known as a “dirty game,” but it seems you can’t believe anything anymore. How is it that people can stand in front of a microphone and say that they never said or did what was recorded on video tape just days or weeks before?

Social media has got to be the worst purveyor of nonsense. I personally try to repost only those items that come from a reputable news source; but there are millions of posts out there that could make you crazy. It’s so easy to be sucked into a lie.

Right now our country is in the midst of a measles epidemic, the first time in decades. Why? Because so many parents believed the fake news that the vaccine was associated with autism and refused to have their children protected! They didn’t get the truth!

A couple of weeks ago I got an email from former Nativity member and friend Ned Long, who now resides in Virginia. He and Joyce are taking a cruise this summer on Celebrity Cruise Lines. He attached to his email an article about how the cruise line was changing the official cruise game from shuffleboard to Tri-ominos, which is a favorite of the Longs. I emailed, wishing him well in the onboard Tri-ominos tournament. He then confessed that he had made up the whole story. It was just a joke! It was all “fake news!”

It’s so hard to find the truth these days! Jesus told his disciples, **“The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”**

Admittedly, there are those who don’t care about the truth. A few days before a little boy was to start kindergarten, he told his mother that he did not intend to go to school.

“You’re very lucky to live in a country where you have the chance to go to school,” said his mother. “This way everyone grows up smart and invents things to make life better.”

The boy went away for a while and thought about it. The he came back and said, “Mom, if everyone in the country is smart, and just *one* person is stupid, will it make any difference?”

The truth that we *really* need to know is not something we got graded on in school. It’s something that God puts in our hearts and minds to guide us through the lies and misinformation of this world.

Author and cell biologist Rebecca Rupp wrote, “You are what you remember.” I think she’s right. That’s why Jesus sends us the Holy Spirit to help us remember what we know.

Two truths are especially important to remember. First, you need to remember who you are.

American author Armistead Maupin grew up in a conservative Christian home where he couldn’t be himself. Later he wrote, “My only regret about being gay is that I repressed it for so long. I surrendered my youth to the people I feared when I could have been out there loving someone. Don’t make that mistake yourself. Life’s too damn short.”

A lot of people in this world are sad and lonely, frustrated and mixed up, because they don’t know who they are—that they are precious to God. They try to find other people to love them enough to fill the hole in their lives. They latch on to lovers who often leave them, to friends who stay with them only as long as they’re buying another round, to groups who will accept them only when they do what the group wants. Any attempt to find our ultimate joy in human beings will end in discouragement. Why? Because we human are imperfect! We mess up!

I have a cartoon of a man, sitting in a pastor’s office. “I don’t know, Pastor,” he says. “Maybe it’s an identity crisis. I just can’t seem to shake this feeling that I’m nothing…a nobody, just an anonymous speck of dust on this huge planet. I feel totally forgettable.”

The pastor sits listening quietly, thinking to himself, “The name, what’s this guy’s name??”

That’s how it is with us humans! We can’t expect others to give us our self-esteem. Only God can do that. People forget us. Only God has our names written on the palms of his hands. People hurt us. Only God loves us forever. People fail us. Only God fills the hole in our lives. You need to remember that. You have known it from the day of your baptism, from the time of your childhood when you sang, “Jesus loves me, this I know.” Some days that song comes back to save us—to save us from becoming ugly and hurtful and hateful—things we are not. The Spirit comes to remind you that you are beautiful and caring and loving because of Jesus.

The Spirit of truth also reminds us of what’s true in the church. There are a lot of phony religions out there, and some of them look pretty good. I ran into a bagger at a grocery store who had his fingernails painted black and satanic signs on his hands….and he looked so innocent!

How will you know whether the nicest, kindest, most sincere people you meet are not recruiters for some wacko cult? How will you know how to treat the stranger and the foreigner, the sinner and those who are different from you? How will you know what is important in life and what really matters in the end? How will you know whether what some speaker says or some blogger posts is good or evil?

We know the truth from the Spirit of truth. The Holy Spirit reminds us of what we learned in Confirmation Class, of what we learned in Bible study, of what we learned in worship, of what we have learned from the saints we have met, of what we have known to be true in those intimate moments with God.

You are what you remember. The more truth you learn of God, the more you know about how Jesus lived and how he loved, the more likely you are to reflect the will of God for the world, and the more others will see Jesus in you. Yes, the world is a mess. It’s always been a mess; but God has a plan. God sent his Spirit of truth. Do you know that truth? The Spirit of truth lives in you.

The Spirit brings power. The Spirit brings truth. Lastly, the Spirit in you brings peace.

A guy sits down at the bar and orders drink after drink. “Is everything okay, Pal?” asks the bartender.

“My wife and I got into a fight and she said she wasn’t going to talk to me for a month!” answers the guy.

Trying to put a positive spin on the situation, the bartender says, “Well, maybe that’s kind of a good thing. You know, a little peace and quiet?”

The guy responds, “Yeah. But today is the last day!”

We live in a world full of turmoil. Even though most of us live rather sheltered lives in our gated communities and retirement villas, there’s a whole wacky world out there. If you don’t know that, just drive down Route 19 during rush hour when all the snowbirds are in town! Unfortunately, it’s not just drivers who seem weirded out these days.

I was amused by reading some questions asked of witnesses during court trials in our country. Listen to some of these actual questions asked by lawyers:

Were you alone or by yourself?

Were you present when your picture was taken?

Was it you or your younger brother who was killed in the war?

Did he kill you?

How many times have you committed suicide?

And these are questions asked by college-educated people! They are funny…but not all foolishness is funny. This life is full of unfairness and injustice, of troubles and trials. We deal with stress-overload, unforgettable regrets, onslaughts of disease, grief, and anxiety. We’re afraid for ourselves, for our families, for our country, for our world.

As a pastor I have heard a lot about what other people are going through, and I have come to this conclusion: All of us have pain. We all have hurts inside. Some hurt worse than others, but we all have scars from the times people put us down or abused us or made us feel we weren’t good enough. This inner distress is the most infectious disease in our world, more common than evil dictators and natural disasters and fears about the unknown. The good news is that we don’t have to face this inner darkness alone. Jesus said, **I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with your forever.”** This Advocate is the Holy Spirit, the one who takes our side, the one whom Jesus called Comforter. Jesus said that when he was gone from our sight, he would leave us peace. **My peace I give to you…Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid.**

There will be times of discouragement in life. There will be times of failure. There will be times of fear. There will be times you feel as if no one understands you. But there is always One who understands, One who knows your pain, One who sticks with you to calm your troubled heart-- the Holy Spirit.

The world is in an uproar. There are dangers in every direction. There is war and violence in every corner. There are threats to our environment, to our financial stability, to our emotional balance, to our children’s safety. And God expects us to do what we can to bless the world and make it a better place. Yet, to begin with we need to find some sense of peace in our own souls. This sanctuary is meant to be a place of peace. That’s what “sanctuary” means—a refuge, a space to find ourselves again in spite of the turmoil around us. The peace of God’s Spirit is right here in this place, right now in this worship service. In the midst of the family of God, surrounded by the symbols of our faith, drenched in the words of hope we hear from the Scriptures, encouraged by the hymns we sing, we find an inner calm that rises up against the fears of the world. The troubles of life may assault us out there like a hurricane battering our little boat in an ocean of uncertainty, but *here* we can release our fears, let go of our worries, and rest because the Spirit brings peace.

The Spirit brings power. The Spirit brings truth. The Spirit brings peace. God wants to run that Spirit through you to bless the world. Don’t hold on to that power! Don’t hide that truth! Don’t hoard that peace! The world out there badly needs what you have inside of you.

I recently saw a video about a woman who felt a burden to share her faith with others in her Texas community, but she was no evangelist. She didn’t even know the names of her neighbors. Do you know what she did? She simply moved a picnic table into her front yard and sat out there in the shade a couple of hours a day, using her laptop. Neighbors walking by starting conversations with her; others came over out of curiosity to ask what she was doing. Soon a whole community was gathering around that picnic table every day, sharing their experiences of life and faith. It was a God thing, the Spirit working through her.

When I was working on this sermon, I thought to myself: “Carlan, what are you doing anyway? You preached for 35 years. You put in your time! You’re retired now. Why are you still getting involved?”

Ever felt that way? Ever said, “I’ve been there, done that. I’ve put in my time. Let somebody else do it.”

Here’s a question for us old people: How many years do you think you have left in this world? How many more summers do you expect to live? What are you planning to do with the rest of your life? What if God wants that Spirit in you to be active in this church, in this community, in this world? What if God wants to run that Holy Spirit through you right into the lives of others? That’s why *I* am standing up here today. What about you? How are you going to let the Spirit use you?

The Holy Spirit is here to stay. The Holy Spirit is in you. For God’s sake, let the Spirit out into the world! Amen